

SEP presidential candidate Bill Van Auken speaks to South Asian press in Sri Lanka

A reporter

21 October 2004

Bill Van Auken, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for US president, addressed more than 20 journalists representing Sri Lankan, Indian and Pakistani newspapers at a press conference in Colombo on Tuesday. Sri Lanka's Swarnavahini television channel videotaped the proceedings and ran a report lasting several minutes during its 8 p.m. news program. The report included an excerpt from Van Auken's remarks, in which he called the US invasion of Iraq a war crime.

The press conference was attended by representatives from Sri Lanka's principal newspapers in English, Sinhalese and Tamil, including, the *Observer*, *Sunday Times*, *Daily Mirror*, *The Island*, *Daily News*, *Virakesari*, *Lankadeepa* and *Lakbima*.

Also present were reporters from the daily *Hindu* and the *Frontline* magazine in India, and the Pakistani daily *Dawn* as well as News Network International, Pakistan's largest news agency.

The national secretary of the Sri Lankan SEP, Wije Dias, opened the press conference and introduced Van Auken, who will speak at SEP meetings in Colombo on Saturday, October 23, and in Kandy on Monday, October 25.

Van Auken began by explaining the internationalist perspective that underlies the SEP's intervention in the 2004 US elections: "I know that there are questions, both here and in the US itself, over why my party agreed to send its candidate abroad for a speaking tour with just two weeks until election day in America. For us, however, it is clear that the November 2 election is not just an American event, but has immense importance for working people all over the world."

Van Auken continued: "We have stated, and not just for effect, that, given the great and negative impact of US imperialism's economic and military policies around the world, it would be entirely fitting to allow people in Sri Lanka and everywhere else to cast votes in a US presidential election."

The SEP candidate pointed to the criminal and wantonly destructive character of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq, noting that the two parties of big business, the Republicans and Democrats, and their candidates, George Bush and John Kerry, are entirely committed to continuing the occupation of Iraq and crushing the resistance of the Iraqi people.

"In Iraq, the US government is carrying out a war that represents a retrogression to the days of naked colonialist aggression and threatens the peoples of the whole world.... The pretexts given for this war by both parties in the US—weapons of mass destruction and Saddam Hussein's alleged links to Al Qaeda—have proven, as

conceded even by the reports prepared by the US government itself, to be lies. What remains is the real reason—the attempt to establish US hegemonic power through the seizure of Iraqi oil reserves.

"Our party is the only one that raises the demand for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq. This is a demand that enjoys the support of tens of millions of Americans, but their sentiments find no reflection in the policies of the corporate-controlled parties, the Democrats and Republicans."

Van Auken went on to say that with the Iraq war and the so-called "war on terrorism," US imperialism had become the most destabilizing force in the world. The rapid rise in oil prices, which has led to a dramatic increase in the cost of living in Sri Lanka and many other countries, was but one consequence of the reckless militarism of the US government.

"We see the interests of workers in US as inextricably bound up with those of workers in Sri Lanka and every other country. Transnational capital scours the globe in search of the cheapest and most exploitable labor, sponsoring the creation of free trade zones that ruthlessly repress workers' rights."

Van Auken pointed to the never-ending assault on the wages, jobs and working conditions of workers in the US. "Workers in the US, just like their counterparts around the globe, are told that if they won't accept lower wages and worsening working conditions, the corporations will simply transfer their operations to another country where even cheaper labor is available.

"There is no national solution to these problems. It requires a unification of the struggles of workers across national boundaries. That is why we reach out to workers of other countries and seek to express their interests in the US elections."

The SEP candidate said the installation of Bush as president by Supreme Court fiat, the vast expansion of police and presidential powers in the name of the war on terrorism, and the undemocratic, arbitrary denial of ballot status to the SEP in Ohio had put the lie to the claim that the US political system is a beacon of democracy to the world.

"Already there are protests over attempts to deny people the right to vote in America on a scale unseen since the days of racial segregation in the South.

"We have been able, only through a very difficult struggle, to place our candidates on the ballot in eight states with a combined population of 40 million. In addition to the undemocratic laws used to keep third-party candidates off the ballot—to get on the

ballot in all 50 states requires the signatures of at least 1 million voters—the Democrats and Republicans have used extra-legal measures to deny us ballot status, throwing out legitimate petitions of voters who want us on the ballot.”

In concluding, Van Auken explained that the SEP campaign was aimed at overturning the state-sponsored two-party system, through which big business exercises a monopoly over political power. “We are fighting to raise the level of political debate in America, to express the interests of the masses of working people, whose interests are not represented by either the Democrats or the Republicans, and to prepare for the future struggles that we know are coming. We are convinced that our campaign will contribute significantly to the political education of workers in the US and to the rebuilding of a powerful international socialist culture within the working class around the world.”

A lively 45-minute question-and-answer session followed Van Auken’s opening statement.

In response to a question as to whether the SEP has a preference between Bush and Kerry, Van Auken said that if he did, he would not be standing for president. Both Bush and Kerry are spokesmen for American big business and supporters of the US occupation of Iraq. Kerry has repeatedly said he is not for leaving Iraq, but rather for “winning” the war. The SEP, by contrast, “stands for the defeat of US imperialism in Iraq, because, otherwise, the US elite will only be encouraged to target other countries for occupation.” Many in the audience shook their heads in agreement.

Asked about the SEP’s attitude toward Bush’s war on terror, Van Auken said it was a fraud. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, had served as a pretext to implement longstanding plans of the US elite to use American military might to stave off economic decline by seizing the oil field of Iraq and placing the US in a strategic position to control the oil of the Middle East and Caspian Sea region. “The war on terror,” he continued, “is being used to terrorize the American people,” to suppress democratic rights at home and pressgang the public into supporting imperialist war.

One reporter asked how US imperialism could be opposed given that the Soviet Union had collapsed and the Chinese regime had embraced capitalism. In reply, Van Auken explained that the Soviet Stalinist regime had proven a false counterweight to imperialism. The Soviet bureaucracy, which had usurped power from the working class, ultimately sought to secure its privileges by acting as the agency through which capitalism was restored in the USSR.

“We don’t put our faith in the European bourgeoisie or the national bourgeoisie in the countries of the so-called developing world, nor in the ossified unions and traditional labor movements. The only force that can effectively and consistently oppose imperialism is the international working class. The US working class, which is facing ever-worsening conditions, can and must be united with workers all over the world in a common struggle against world capitalism.”

In reply to a question about the SEP’s view of the concept of a “unipolar world,” Van Auken stressed that the claims of US strength had been vastly exaggerated. The increasing reliance by the US on military power was a sign not of strength, but of

economic decline. The US was now the world’s largest debtor nation and had a \$600 billion annual trade deficit. Washington’s attempt to conquer Iraq had, moreover, turned into a fiasco.

The real polarization in the US was not between Republicans and Democrats, but between the overwhelming majority, comprised of working people, and a narrow, increasingly voracious and politically isolated big business elite. The US is, he insisted, “a country in grave crisis.”

This answer prompted a further question as to why, if working people were opposed to the war, their opposition was not finding expression in the elections. Van Auken noted that in the weeks preceding the invasion of Iraq, under conditions where the Bush administration and a pliant media were trying to drum up support for war with concocted tales of Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction and Al Qaeda ties, the US saw the largest antiwar demonstrations in its history.

Using the two-party system, the corporate media, and grossly undemocratic electoral laws, the US elite was doing everything it could to disenfranchise opponents of the war. Complicit in this effort were the trade unions. “The unions,” said Van Auken, “are a shadow of their former selves. They have proven incapable of countering the attacks that began under Reagan, and they remain firmly behind the Democratic Party.”

The US is wracked by crisis, he reiterated. The economic position of the US is untenable, and working people are being radicalized and thrust into struggle. This has been reflected in growing support for the SEP campaign.

There were further questions about the SEP’s policies for US workers, how the US has been able to sustain itself while amassing vast current account and trade deficits, the SEP’s attitude toward the struggle of the Palestinian people, the nature of the alliance between the US government and the corporate media, and the role of the unions.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact